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### Deposited in DRO:

14 January 2014

### Version of attached file:

Published Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Downes, Julia and Breeze, Maddie and Griffin, Naomi (2013) 'Researching DIY cultures : towards a situated ethical practice for activist-academia.', Graduate journal of social science., 10 (3). pp. 100-124.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.gjss.org/issues/10/03>

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# Researching DIY Cultures: Towards a Situated Ethical Practice for Activist-Academia

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*The empirical study of DIY culture and feminist cultural activism is a flourishing interdisciplinary research area particularly in the USA, Canada, Australia and UK. This has enabled a growth in participant-researchers doing research on their own DIY cultures and activist communities of belonging. Tensions occur here for the participant-researcher in relation to conventional data collection methods, ethical and moral decisions and modes of research dissemination. This article develops discussions of dilemmas experienced by the authors during doctoral research projects on DIY punk, roller derby and queer feminist music cultures. We detail the possibilities and tensions met when the participant-researcher encounters existing subcultural theories, ethical codes of practice, data collection methods and the dissemination of academic research. In addition we offer insights into the under-documented emotional impacts and moments of crisis the participant-researcher needs to attend to when carrying out research with/in personal and political communities of belonging. In conclusion, we offer a series of recommendations for a situated ethical practice for research with/in DIY cultures in relation to engaged data generation methods, flexible ethical thinking and communities of practice.*

*Keywords: DIY Culture, Feminist Cultural Activism, Research Ethics, Participant-Researcher, Activist-Academia.*

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## **Doing Activist-Academia: Key Dilemmas of the DIY Researcher-Participant**

The academic study of 'DIY culture', 'cultural production', 'cultural activism' and 'cultural resistance' has become a burgeoning interdisciplinary area of interest across

anthropology (Mahon 2000), sociology (Moore 2007), media studies (Duncombe 1997; 2002), graphic design (Triggs 2006), cultural studies (McKay 1998) and popular music studies (Strachan 2007). In general these practices refer to 'culture that is used, consciously or uncon-

sciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic or social structure' (Duncombe 2002, 5). Important feminist interventions in subcultural studies identified the problematic privileging of the public activities of boys and young men (McRobbie and Garber 1976; McRobbie 1980) and opened up attention to the cultural lives of girls and young women. This sub-discipline, often known as 'girls studies', seeks to affirm the political agency and cultural productivity of girls and young women as subjects of critical inquiry (Kearney 2009). Subsequent interest in feminist cultural activism has grown in the US, Canada, UK and Australia (Leonard 1998; Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998; Driscoll 2002; Morris 2008; Kearney 2006; Driver 2007; Downes 2008; Marcus 2010). The study of girls and young women's DIY cultural participations in fanzines and blogs (Zobl 2009; Sabin and Triggs 2000), grassroots sports such as roller derby and skateboarding (Carlson 2010, 2011; Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly 2004; Pavlidis 2012; Pavlidis and Fulagar 2012), and an array of music cultures including riot grrrl, punk, rock and hip hop (LeBlanc 1999; Schippers 2002; Pough 2004; Reddington 2007; Downes 2012) have made important theoretical contributions to the social construction of gender, sexuality and feminism in contemporary society.

This burgeoning academic legitimacy of DIY culture and the cultural

lives of girls and young women has run in parallel with the expansion of the UK higher education system. This has led to an influx of undergraduate and postgraduate students and the University as a space to document and critically interrogate radical lives, histories and cultural practices. Scholars of DIY cultures and radical social movements have acknowledged tensions and contradictions between academic (outsider) and activist (insider) positions (Halfacree 2004; Cresswell and Spandler 2012) and the academic treatment of subcultures has been critiqued by 'punkademics': punk cultural producers who later enter academic worlds (Furness 2012). Furthermore early career activist-academics have found that the conventions of neoliberal higher education institutions limit imagination for radical teaching, research and activism (SIGJ2 2012). However practical guidance or discussion of the ethical and moral dilemmas in making *personal* activist and radical cultures visible within academic structures is limited. In particular, little is currently known about the challenges of the *participant-researcher* of DIY feminist cultural activism: the researcher who conducts research in pre-existing social, personal and activist networks that they have been an active participant in before the opportunity of an academic research project arose. We are not suggesting that the participant-researcher represents a purer 'insider' position, able to access closed DIY

worlds suspicious of academic 'outsiders' and thereby provide more 'authentic' accounts. However the participant-researcher is more likely to encounter tensions in established data collection methods, ethical protocols and modes of research dissemination that arguably constrain accounts of the multiplicity, complexity and contestation at the heart of DIY cultural life.

Recently in the UK events such as 'A Carnival of Feminist Cultural Activism' held in March 2011 at the University of York, 'Researching Feminist Futures' conference held in September 2011 at the University of Edinburgh, and the 'Gender and Subcultures' symposium held in September 2012 at Northumbria University, have provided spaces within which to bring together researchers, academics and post-graduate students engaged in critical inquiries of feminist cultural activism. It is through these spaces that the authors of this article met. In particular, this paper develops on discussions between the authors at the 'Researching DIY Cultures' workshop held as a free event associated with the 'Gender and Subcultures' symposium at Northumbria University.

In accordance with a critical tradition that acknowledges the operation of power within knowledge production and an understanding of knowledge as situated, partial and located (Spivak 1988; Haraway 1988; Foucault 1970), we wish

to make our locations within DIY and academic worlds clear. Julia Downes has been involved in DIY feminist cultural activism since 2002 when she co-founded the DIY queer feminist Manifesta collective in Leeds, UK. This collective, and associated projects and collectives (e.g. Homocrime, Local Kid, FAG club, Ladyfest and Ladies Rock!), became the topic of her doctoral research from 2006–2009. Julia left Manifesta in May 2009 and completed her ESRC-funded doctorate on DIY queer feminist cultural resistance at the University of Leeds in 2010. She currently organises DIY queer feminist events in Newcastle upon Tyne as 'even clean hands cause damage' and works as a Research Associate at Durham University. Maddie Breeze's ESRC-funded doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh is an ethnographic exploration of creative, critical and collaborative practice in roller derby. Maddie's research grew out of her involvement with Edinburgh's roller derby league, which she co-founded in 2008. After long periods of recurrent injury Maddie stopped skating in 2011, and left the league in spring 2012. Naomi Griffin is currently undertaking her doctoral research into DIY punk in the North East of England at Northumbria University. Naomi has been involved in DIY punk to varying degrees for almost a decade. She co-founded the Equestrian Collective (a collective based in Durham City which

organises punk shows and other events), is involved in a DIY record label (Discount Horse records), and has been in several bands over the years.

We draw on our own experiences throughout the doctoral research process to discuss marginalised ethical issues, complexities and dilemmas involved in researching radical, underground, DIY cultures and communities of personal and political belonging. We aim to respond to current gaps in research guidance and doctoral supervision to critically examine the ethical, moral and practical dilemmas, possibilities and potentials of doing research with/in radical DIY cultures as a participant-researcher. We conclude with some constructive recommendations for future practice in relation to research ethics, engaged methods of data generation and communities of practice.

### **1. Confronting the Academic Study of DIY Cultures**

For some of us, the first steps into academia can seem like a logical outcome of the critical thinking skills acquired in a life embedded in radical pedagogies and alternative knowledge production. However academic knowledge produced about DIY cultures and activist lives can feel stilted. For instance, in his introduction 'Attempted Education and Righteous Accusations', Zack Furness criticises the way that punk has become another 'object' or 'text'

of study analysed by scholars who 'seem to have a limited knowledge of punk music and DIY culture, and a level of engagement with punk scenes that is more akin to casual tourism than active participation' (Furness 2012, 12). The effect of this has meant that punk scholarship tends to be preoccupied with romantic, nostalgic and orthodox accounts that perpetuate dominant narratives about punk that marginalise women and girls, people of colour and queers from historical and contemporary accounts. Everyday punk practices and DIY cultural lives are displaced by a competition over definitions and dichotomous debates: is it a 'subculture' a 'neo-tribe', a 'post-subculture', a 'youth culture' or a 'scene'? Is it resistance or recuperation? Is it authentic or inauthentic? What are the identities that subcultures construct? In short, we concur with Zack Furness (2012) that 'outsider' academics who do not meaningfully engage with the DIY worlds they are researching can risk producing limited theories of radical DIY cultural practices. A DIY cultural participant who initially encounters this discipline in their undergraduate or postgraduate studies will inevitably find the area overwhelming and difficult to navigate. The scarcity of in-depth research with/in DIY cultures, its preoccupation with one-dimensional debates, and a paucity of dialogue among academic colleagues about DIY cultures creates a difficult milieu in which to carve

out space to explore the everyday practices, processes and power relations of DIY cultures. Impacts of this include struggling with previous research and theory that feels alienating and spending an inordinate amount of time (in presentations) and/or words (in writing) describing DIY culture as an 'object'.

### **Ambivalences of the Subcultural 'Object'**

All authors have experienced the pressure to provide a coherent definition of our chosen DIY or subcultural 'object': riot grrrl, roller derby and punk. However in our experience our 'object' did not behave, stay still or remain in the boundaries of pre-established terms, debates and dominant media representations. The traditional focus of subcultures as examples of resistance to hegemonic power relations (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979) failed to account for the complexity and contradictions of DIY cultures. For example, researching roller derby requires defining a cluster of diverse, conflict-ridden but nevertheless converging practices: to make a statement about what roller derby is. However from the perspective of a participant-researcher, the meaning of roller derby is multiple, shifting and not necessarily *coherent* (see Law 2004; Mol 2002). Consensus as to what roller derby is occurs loosely and occasionally, changes over time and is contingent upon the specific location of those involved. In partic-

ular, there is ambivalence in defining roller derby as a *subcultural* and *feminist* practice, a meaning that has become dominant in academic research and media accounts, as roller derby participants increasingly legitimise roller derby as a *sport*. For instance, in previous research, links between roller derby and riot grrrl cultures have been made (Pavlidis 2012; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2012), and the supposed 'punk' or 'rockabilly' aesthetic of roller derby has become central to media accounts of roller derby, for instance:

Ordinary sportswomen these punks are not [...] Many of the female spectators have piercings and dyed black hair; some of their husbands have uncommonly long beards; and there is the occasional tot with a fun-sized Mohawk [...] In fact, the only people not pierced or tattooed (aside from the children) are two first-aiders from St John Ambulance, who look bemused but are ready to jump to action if and when necessary (Halgrave 2010, para. 3, 5, 6).

However many skaters are scathing of the focus on subcultural aesthetics and reject the notion of roller derby as an example of alternative or subversive culture, instead preferring roller derby to be represented simply as 'sport'. For instance, in discussion with the local news in 2010, 'The Beefcake'



was at pains to distance roller derby from such media caricatures, saying 'some people [who play roller derby] haven't even heard a punk band before' (Field notes, October 2010). In general a consensus develops that roller derby is more similar than different to other forms of sport.

Similarly much has been made of the potential for gender transgression and re-constructions of femininity in roller derby as a feminist practice (Finley 2010; Carlson 2010). However representations of roller derby as an example of gender and/or feminist activism are not necessarily justified by skaters' definitions of their own practice. For instance, during discussion in a film-making workshop in September 2011 BM argued:

I do always think that's kind of interesting, whenever you're talking about roller derby it always goes straight to the feminism issues, [mmm] whereas you know, which is, it can make sense, but at the same time it immediately also detracts from the sport [yeah] [mmm] you know it's not just about feminism [yeah, yeah] it's also about people that just really, really like proper sport and skating and working hard and training and that whole camaraderie team thing, just so if I were to make a roller derby movie, I would have something that focused on, girls being on a sports team and you know everything that goes with

it and then obviously you know you'd kind of have as a side line that this feminism thing comes up but not as a main focus because that's done all the time.

Representing roller derby as a 'real' sport is a contemporary concern of great importance, and many skaters would probably prefer an account of roller derby as 'just like any other sport'. The conscious effort to establish roller derby as an international sport (with a world cup, national governing bodies and official rankings), and the increasing irrelevance of 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995) among participants co-exists with an abundance of practices that mark roller derby as somewhat different to 'sport' (being DIY, being dominated by women, being a profusion of self-satire). This challenges a simplistic dichotomy in which resistance and recuperation are mutually exclusive entities. There is evidence that roller derby skaters actively agitate for their culture to become a legitimate 'mainstream' sport in the public sphere. Therefore a commitment to ontological multiplicity is helpful here: roller derby can be and is 'just a sport' at the same time as existing in many other confusing, wonderful, ridiculous and inspiring forms.

In summary, from a participant-researcher position initial encounters with academic accounts of DIY cultures can seem alienating, one-dimensional and simplistic.

However future research with/in DIY cultural activism from the position of the participant-researcher has the potential to develop academic thinking on DIY cultures and promote the critical exploration of everyday practices, processes, actions and power relations of DIY cultures. In the next section we focus on common fieldwork dilemmas that confront the participant-researcher that demand a more flexible and situated ethical practice that may require deviations from, and additions to, standard ethical protocols.

## **2. The Research Process: Ethical and Moral Dilemmas**

In the 'Researching DIY Cultures' workshop we shared a number of ethical and moral dilemmas encountered throughout the research process. Doing research is not a matter of simply following rules, procedures and protocols but requires researchers to become 'ethical thinkers' capable of responding to unanticipated situations appropriately throughout the research process (Clark and Walker 2011). In the following, we explore four key dilemmas we encountered: anonymity and the use of pseudonyms, research with friends, meaningful informed consent, and the emotional impact of research with/in DIY cultures of belonging.

### **Anonymity and the Use of Pseudonyms**

Some ethical guidelines consider discussion of gender and politics to

be sensitive topics. For instance, one social sciences postgraduate handbook stipulates that 'sensitive topics can include participants' sexual behaviour, their illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, their abuse or exploitation, their mental health, their gender or ethnic status'. Therefore it is often taken for granted that researchers should guarantee anonymity to research participants and use pseudonyms within reports and presentations to prevent the identification of participants. However research with/in queer communities and activists has found anonymity and pseudonyms problematic. For instance, Kath Browne (2003) characterised the negotiation of pseudonyms within her doctoral research of non-heterosexual women as an operation of micro-level power relations between the researcher and participant. She gives the example of a participant who wanted to be explicitly named in the research and when Browne refused she insisted on the pseudonym 'Pat Butcher'. This nickname had already been given to her by her friends and would nonetheless reveal the identities of her girlfriend, friends and family. Mark Cresswell and Helen Spandler describe this as a 'contradiction between seeing social movement [activists] as critical agents of change and gazing upon them "academically" as objects of research' (Cresswell and Spandler 2012, 11). They give the example of Kathryn Church's work with psychiatric survivors who 'felt ethically



bound to name her subjects of research “explicitly” (Cresswell and Spandler 2012, 22). Naming was felt to be an important strategy in a society that has not acknowledged the labour of activists in order to position research participants as public and critical agents of social change.

Consequently, naming became a common strategy for the authors in research with/in DIY cultures. For example, within an oral history of British riot grrrl the use of pseudonyms quickly became untenable. All participants wanted to be named. Furthermore the production of a history that changed all identifiable information would have further marginalised women’s labour in a moment of DIY feminist cultural activism that has arguably been distorted in previous histories (e.g. Reynolds and Press 1995). In short, the individuals, bands and projects involved wanted their activities and experiences to be made more visible and public. Therefore the focus shifted to provide each participant with a space for self-representation in the thesis itself. Each participant was given the opportunity to write their own (un-edited) biography for inclusion in the thesis (see Downes 2009). In keeping with alternative practices of knowledge production (i.e. the fanzine), participants could contextualise their contribution and represent their lives and riot grrrl involvement in a forum free from censorship. For example, Karren Ablaze chose to describe herself in the following biography:

Karren was raised by wolves in the North of England. Her first fanzine, written at age 14, was called *The Value of Defiance*, although she lacked the courage to publish at the time. She then produced *I Hate Punks* (1986), *Made in Manchester* (1987), *Ablaze!* (1987–1993) and a number of shorter zines. From 1994–1999 she fronted the pop groups *Coping Saw*, *The Bogus Pony Club* (alongside Simon Cain), *Wack Cat* and *Action Central*. Since then she has spent five years living in a Buddhist Centre in the East Yorkshire countryside. She can now be located in the Hyde Park district of Leeds where she works as a writer.

Similarly the use of pseudonyms in research with roller derby became relatively unworkable. As research unfolded with a tight-knit group of skaters who intimately knew each other, guarantees of anonymity for participants became impossible. This meant that removing all identifiable information and use of pseudonyms became difficult as any ‘ethnographic information’ could easily identify skaters. Moreover, roller derby is a context where participants regularly go by multiple names, if not multiple identities. Most skaters in the league know each other by their derby name or skate name: a made up name adopted for the purpose of playing roller derby. Many skaters expressed that they were happy for their identity to be made explicit and

for quotes to be directly attributed to them. An atmosphere of playful name-taking and lack of concern for anonymity was made explicit when 'The Beefcake' and 'Aladdin' began using their pseudonyms to refer to themselves and each other in posts they made to the league's online forum discussion space, thus outing themselves and removing the possibility of anonymity in papers previously produced and disseminated.

From the position of the participant-researcher, the conventional use of pseudonyms and guarantees of anonymity can become unworkable. The practice of imposing pseudonyms and removing identifiable information can undermine participant labour, power and agency. The intimate bonds and knowledge between participants in tight-knit cultural groups and actions taken by participants to 'out' themselves challenge the possibilities and desirability of anonymity itself. This means that in research on DIY cultures the explicit naming of participants can become a moral and ethical obligation.

### **Friendships and Social Networks**

Dydia DeLyser (2001) warns that researchers who are already close to their participants or research area can become 'overflowed with material' due to the amount of experiential and descriptive knowledge they hold. Being 'doubly located' as a friend and researcher was an issue that all authors found prob-

lematic. For instance, information that has accumulated about participants over years of friendship becomes particularly troubling. One key dilemma centred on the status of statements that could be hurtful or inflammatory if made public in research, even if these statements were made anonymously. The meanings of flippant, angry or funny comments shift when recorded and re-stated. Words appear again in contexts that were never intended, that were unimaginable when they were spoken. Nuance is subsumed in academic style. What is lost when rolled eyes, raised eyebrows, funny voices, raucous laughter, self-deprecating tones, hugs, smiles and spoken scare-quotes do not translate? In this case, anonymity in itself is an insufficient criterion for ethical research with/in DIY cultures. Participants said and did things that despite supposed guarantees of anonymity could be controversial or harmful if and when read back. In carrying out research on queer music culture with her friends in Brisbane, Jodie Taylor (2011) described the dilemmas in her position as an 'intimate insider'. She described needing to be an 'ethical friend':

Friendship (like research) has rules of engagement and being an ethical friend may mean not betraying confidence imparted. However, being an ethical friend may also at times compromise

one's research, particularly what you allow yourself to see as a researcher and what you choose to communicate with outsiders: that is, what you say and what you do not say (2011, 3).

Therefore it takes skill to negotiate what participants tell you as a friend and what they tell you as a researcher. In the pursuit of a situated ethical practice, empirical material considered potentially harmful was excluded. In a number of situations 'omission is political; it is tricky, yet it is often necessary' (Taylor 2011, 14). For example, in the following reflexive account one author describes the complexities of her double location as researcher and friend in her research with roller derby:

I share an office with six other post-grad students one of whom plays roller derby with the league I helped start and now research with. We first met in 2009, at the university through awkward and cringe-worthy institutional induction days and compulsory courses. I told her about roller derby and suggested she try it. I love her completely and without qualification. I can remember practicing hits and blocks with her, sweating and laughing, skating up and down in a small sports hall out of town. I think it was her first time practicing hits and I tried to help by talking through how to plant her shoulder square in my chest

with enough force to wind me, and how to skate into me with her hips to upset my centre of gravity and knock me off my feet.

A few days ago I needed a place to stay, and we had already made plans to eat dinner together that night at her flat near our university building and not for the first time she lets me crash in her bed. Just as we're falling asleep she says sorry: earlier in the week we'd been talking about whether or not the league – our league – was inclusive, she says that she feels like she's "aggressive and intolerant" talking about roller derby with me. My engagement in this previous conversation was almost entirely academic, perhaps I was hiding in some kind of supposed safe zone behind 'my role of researcher'. I had said "I don't think it's my job to say whether its inclusive or not", I wanted to convey how what I was interested in was how and why skaters celebrated the league's 'inclusivity', and what work this kind of talk does while exclusions are simultaneously enacted.

In bed that night we try to work it out, she says she's interested in what I think "as a person, not as a researcher" but when it comes to roller derby I feel like I'm both at the same time, just because I'm a researcher doesn't mean I'm not a person, surely? She says she has two ideas of me. The first is of someone who used to be so

heavily involved in roller derby that “the league is infused with you, there are all these little bits that are just you” but who steadily over time has become more distant so that “there are people in the league now who don’t know you” and I don’t know them. The second is “one of her best friends in the world”. She says she can’t think of these two people as the same person (Field notes, November 2012).

This account illustrates how conducting research with/in DIY culture and pre-existing friendships inevitably changes one’s relationship to the subject and people involved. The risks of carrying out academic research within pre-existing friendships, DIY cultures and activist networks of belonging needs more consideration in doctoral supervision and ethical training.

### **Meaningful Informed Consent**

Typically researchers need to submit evidence of how they will guarantee each participant will give their informed consent before data collection will begin. This ‘contractual model’ of the ‘informed consent’ process usually consists of a participant information sheet and consent form that needs to be signed by the participant before data collection can commence. Viewing informed consent as a one-off contractual obligation became unworkable for the participant-researcher of DIY

culture. The informed consent form was useful for the more prominent or explicit moments of data generation, such as semi-structured interviews, oral histories, focus groups and film workshops. However, in ethnographic and auto-ethnographic projects it became difficult to guarantee meaningful informed consent in everyday situations that were not public. The boundary between personal life and the researcher role became blurred. For example, for one author presence at and participation in almost every event associated with the roller derby league was nothing out of the ordinary. For three years roller derby was everything; it infused almost every aspect of her life. In this way ‘doing research’ was not at the front of her mind or even in her consciousness for much of the time. It is often in retrospect that conversations and events began to become ‘data’. Similarly for another author, her presence and participation in band practices, meetings, hanging out, going dancing, putting on and/or playing at gigs seemed mundane. It often felt counter-intuitive to introduce informed consent forms in these everyday situations.

However membership of these communities had been established prior to the opportunity for a research project. In these situations it was productive to view informed consent as a dynamic, adaptive and situated process between the participant and participant-researcher. This meant, on top of the respon-

sibilities of being an 'ethical friend' (Taylor 2011), there was a responsibility to find new ways to make research activity explicit in ways that made sense for a given DIY culture. For example, one author started a thread on the roller derby league's online forum that detailed what she hoped to do, made it clear that anyone could opt out of being included, and invited questions, suggestions and comments. This acted as a kind of on-going space for discussion where monthly updates were posted to keep skaters informed. Another author continued to contribute to a queer feminist collective fanzine as a space to write and think about theory in relation to lived experiences of doing queer feminist activism with contributions on DIY burnout, men in feminism and living in an abusive relationship as a feminist activist. This practice of fanzine field notes became a key way to exercise self-reflexivity and dialogue in a space of comfort.

Another way to highlight the complexities of informed consent for the DIY participant-researcher is to foreground the negotiations that take place in the re-representation of everyday conversations within academic spaces. For instance, reflecting on her decision to include the conversation with LG above, Breeze writes:

In preparation for this paper I asked LG for her consent that I give an account of a conversation

we had, described above. Conversations had in someone's bed are different from conversations taking place in a pre-arranged recorded interview precluded by the signing of an informed consent form. I sent LG what I'd written and described the context and aims of the paper. She agreed that I could use the account but that she hadn't really had the chance to think about the issue properly. She also stated that after reading back my interpretation of the conversation it did not match up with what she was trying to convey.

Initially my response was that given the inadequate amount of time I'd allowed for LG to think through the issues I could not defend including my account of our conversation in this paper. The feeling that the gulf between intention and interpretations (I still didn't understand what she was saying) was verging on unbridgeable compounded my conviction that the only ethical course of action was to not write about the conversation, until there had been time and space for LG to consider it properly and for us both to work towards a more common understanding of what the conversation was about. And yet, not only do I re-present that conversation here but foreground the negotiations surrounding it.

My reason for doing so is simply that I think that honest engagement with these issues in a paper

such as this is one way among many to work towards situated ethical practice. Surely both the issue of researchers not insuring adequate time for participants to think through their consent and that of multiple interpretations and misunderstandings of words uttered are common to research practices out with my own? Informed consent forms do not so much guard against these twin risks as sweep them under the carpet. In attempting to lay bare the sordid details and shortcomings of my informed consent procedures here I hope to work towards developing a more rigorous ethical practice (Field notes, November 2012).

This example illustrates how reflective writing about dilemmas of interpretative dominance and negotiations of consent in diaries, personal journals and fanzines is essential for a participant-researcher of DIY culture that seeks to problematise power in knowledge production. Therefore, from the participant-researcher position conventional informed consent procedures i.e. a one-off contractual document is problematic. Instead, a situated and flexible approach towards negotiating meaningful informed consent in a way that makes sense within a specific DIY culture is more productive. This requires sophisticated ethical thinking to find ways to make research activity explicit, to negotiate

multiple interpretations and to be reflexive of the complex power dynamics and demands of academic research on participants as friends and cultural participants.

### **Affect and Emotional Life of Research**

At the 'Researching DIY Cultures' workshop we discussed the affective life of research: the unexpected moments of discomfort, tension and anxiety. In particular, we focused on the impact of doing research on topics so close to us and how this could transform our relationship to the groups, scenes, communities and movements that we studied. We all shared experiences of being unaware, before we started our projects, of the emotional turmoil that could result from doing research within personal worlds. A key risk of – in some sense – turning your DIY life into work is that you risk losing your passion. During doctoral research our affective attachments within DIY cultural worlds changed. For example, an already ambivalent 'love-hate' relationship with DIY punk was intensified by doctoral research. Doctoral research requires negotiating the critical interrogation of the benefits and limitations of DIY punk scenes with defensive feelings of DIY culture when criticisms are made by 'outsiders'. For these reasons, acknowledging partiality and 'doubly located' positions requires a reflexive tactic. One strategy is the use of a research diary to document



and navigate these anxieties.

DIY cultural life and personal relationships can break down, shift and transform throughout the research project. For example, in doctoral research on queer feminist music cultures a moment of personal crisis and conflict led the researcher-participant to end her participation and paralysed the final year of writing up. However it was only by using theory and feminist history to make sense of this crisis that the participant-researcher was enabled to push beyond a one-dimensional account of DIY queer feminist culture to reveal problematic power relations within feminist activism across intersections of gender, sexuality, race and class. To illustrate, the problem of homophobia in the early stages of the collective was raised in an email interview:

When I was in [the collective] the first time round I had a lot of problems with not being supported [...] I was insecure because I didn't feel like I fitted in the threesome that directed all of [the collective], because I lacked musical knowledge, knowledge of riot grrrl history, and confidence. I was undermined and mocked increasingly frequently and my confidence went right down. When we had that meeting about [the feminist night club] and how people were coming down the stairs would just see a load of queers and it was putting people off and

what were we going to do about it and as their friends would I talk to them so they wouldn't go on the door I thankfully realised I couldn't be part of it anymore. But sadly nor could I speak out about it at the time. It was weird because the homophobia was becoming more overt and it just felt bad to me as a queer but I had no way of talking about it, and no 'resources', basically, and it didn't really occur to me to expect better from a feminist collective. And in those days although loads of people involved in [the feminist collective] events were queer there was no collective identity or unity or vocabulary at all.

This experience of homophobia within the collective highlighted the lack of a shared vocabulary and resource for the articulation of queer identities within a DIY feminist collective. The solution for this collective member was to remove herself from the feminist collective in 2004 and participate in queer events developed by a faction of the feminist collective, who created queer-orientated events. Therefore, these activities emerged as an innovative tactic to deal with the internal conflicts of the feminist collective. This eventually led to the development of an overtly queer agenda within the feminist collective as some involved in the feminist club night and the queer club night united in the co-production of the queer feminist

club night in 2006. In this sense, internal conflict led to the creation of a valuable queer feminist agenda that, in the long term, benefited a wider community in providing opportunities to challenge homophobia and produce awareness of the intersections of gender and sexual oppression. Nonetheless, as Carol Mueller warned, 'internal conflicts are almost invariably destructive of individuals' (Mueller 1995, 275) and there were considerable personal costs within this transition. As the one member from this situation who was still around, the participant-researcher was subject to personal 'trashing' within feminist and queer social circles, which once revealed, years after the event, led to her departure from the queer feminist collective in May 2009. Within her parting words in an email to the collective email list on 3 May 2009, the participant-researcher reflected on her frustrations with being 'trashed', and inability to work with, or trust, individuals who have taken part in the 'trashing':

I now find various people really difficult to work with and an uncritical use of space, language, gossip, resources and structure has really made me aware of how different my ideas and perspectives on queer feminist DIY culture are as well as how misrepresented I have been. I am, as far back as I can remember, deeply committed to the production of positive

and empowering creative spaces for women, queers and feminists to be visible, loud and heard. [...] Music making and queer feminist politics are both incredibly important parts of me, they feed into the majority of my everyday life in terms of my research, job, writing, thinking, bands, social life and teaching. [...] Despite the recent dips in energy, in the past [the feminist collective] has been an incredible space and community for me to explore ideas of queer feminist cultural production and has enabled me to figure out so much personally and politically. I will continue to produce and support these cultural spaces on my own terms not as part of [the feminist collective].

Therefore doing research on DIY queer feminist music cultures of belonging, embedded with personal investment, emotional labour and intimate friendships, can reveal harmful power relations. As Levinson (2010) warns, participant-researchers must be able to react appropriately to changes in the field. Therefore it is important to prepare for diverse possibilities including if the group, activity, or phenomena you are studying alters or stops, or if the knowledge you encounter causes personal distress.

In summary, the particular ethical and moral decisions faced by the participant-researcher can demand deviations, and additions to, exist-

ing ethical protocols. The complexities embedded in the position of the participant-researcher require conventional ethical practices of pseudonyms, anonymity and informed consent to be rethought. This may, if appropriate and with participants' consent, result in the explicit naming of research participants, the development of innovative tactics to make moments of research explicit to participants within everyday contexts and situations, and a developed awareness of how to be an 'ethical friend' and make informed judgements of what to include and exclude from research. The participant-researcher may also experience affective disturbance during the research process as attachments to friends, partners, DIY culture and political identity are scrutinised. The research process can also reveal harmful behaviours, alter friendships, undermine passion and enthusiasm, and even end DIY cultural participation. Current ethical training, procedures and doctoral supervision need to acknowledge and respond to the unique complexities of the participant-researcher position.

### **3. Doing Research Differently: Data Generation**

One of the things we found the most challenging and confusing from the participant-researcher position was generating data through everyday activities and relationships that were already part of our lives. The

boundary between the participant and researcher collapses and the practice of filtering everyday activities for research data is uncomfortable. As one author recalls, 'a part of me just did not want to be thinking about or doing research when I was talking, dancing, laughing, crying, planning, organising and playing roller derby with my friends. Part of me revolted (was revolted) at doing research in this way.' In particular, we all found making field notes difficult. The performance of being a researcher visibly making field notes can contribute to a feeling of discomfort among participants aware of being researched. As participant-researchers come to the research process with a wealth of knowledge about the taken-for-granted practices of DIY life, alternative forms of note taking in the form of a 'scratch pad' were more useful to capture the basic details of what happened on particular dates, be it a gig, an interview, a social event or a roller derby bout.

Semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded conversations ordered around a series of pre-planned prompts, in cafes, pubs, kitchens and living rooms, were less ambiguous as moments of data generation. However, the participant-researcher may become acutely aware of their role within such encounters in the construction of DIY culture. For instance, on more than one occasion, when interviewing skaters who had joined the league only recently, the

participant-researcher often became the subject of their questioning:

Yeah so wait did you guys, did you like get together and just be like 'well let's try roller skating?' (FS, individual interview, May 2011).

In both these interviews, the participant-researcher's status as someone who was 'there from the beginning' becomes the occasion for 'interviewees' asking the 'interviewer' to give an account of what it used to be like and of how the league started. By answering and telling the story, the participant-researcher becomes aware of the ridiculousness of this research, and perhaps of research in general, the idea that you can ask people to express complicated things immediately in words (Gauntlett 2007, 3) but also a sense of just how impossible it would be to bracket off my role in literally creating this thing that I research. These tensions led participant-researchers to do research differently and create innovative moments of collaborative data generation centred on a practical task that complemented the everyday activities of a given DIY culture.

For example, in the case of roller derby, data was generated through a collaborative film-making project. A series of workshops was designed that moved through stages of planning, filming and editing a film about roller derby, the league and the skaters. Skaters who signed up to

the workshops took on the roles of designing and executing the production of a film, and the participant-researcher played the role of facilitator. The workshops were a method of data generation that was explicitly a research exercise, but was not limited exclusively to this function; the production of a film was a key rationale. The content of the workshops, in which skaters worked together creatively to respond to the question of how best to represent roller derby on film, was not that far removed from skater's daily roller derby practices, where questions of the design of posters, logos, bout names, merchandise and what to wear centre debates on representation. Thus, the workshops came to be an in-between compromise, a facilitated process that was evidently research and was bounded enough and explicit enough to overlap tightly with the research agenda, yet shared significant similarities with usual league business and ensured skaters led the way. This enabled participants to invest in the activity but also for research to be useful to the DIY culture.

In summary, the participant-researcher position can reveal the limits of conventional data collection methods of ethnographic field notes and interviews. The discomfort experienced in performing the researcher engaging participants in moments of thesis-orientated data collection using methods either marked as different or removed from

the everyday life of the DIY culture motivates a search for collaborative, engaged and situated data generation activities. The best solutions to this dilemma involve finding new ways to co-construct data in the everyday activities of what DIY cultures already do or aspire to do. In particular, facilitating the documentation and self-representation of DIY cultures in film, fanzines, art, music, archives, exhibitions and events offers an innovative avenue for future research with/in DIY cultures.

#### **4. Research Dissemination: Conferences and Communities of Practice**

A key requirement towards the end of the doctoral process involves disseminating research findings at a national and international level. The most commonly available forums for sharing and discussing research are academic conferences. Academic conferences can often disappoint expectations and collapse into a space that stifles rather than promotes critical discussion and debate. There have been positive attempts to rework the conference format and shift the atmosphere to promote discussion of radical and DIY feminist cultural activism by including workshops, films, art projects (e.g. The Bad Art collective) and after parties with music. Nonetheless, conferences tend to take place within academic institutions that often charge a fee for admission and/or participation and

consist of a structured day of concurrent panel sessions consisting of 3–4 short (15–20 minutes) papers, delivered in a didactic fashion by a single speaker followed by a question and answer session. The effectiveness of academic conferences has been questioned by academic-activists:

At their best, such meetings are spaces for colleagues to form new friendships, exchange ideas, be inspired by new research, and wrestle with current debates in their chosen field. At their worst, they are a train wreck of ill-prepared and poorly delivered PowerPoint presentations with speakers talking way too fast and yet still managing to not finish in their allotted time. Of course such presentations produce another line on your vita, even if you gave your paper to five people, one of whom left halfway through (Haenfler 2012, 41).

We shared a sense of frustration at the amount of time and energy we spent defining and describing our DIY cultural object and its political, social and cultural significance in academic conferences. Although this is symptomatic of the marginal position that DIY feminist cultural activism inhabits across a range of academic disciplines, the repetitive experience of starting from basic terms curtails discussion of the complexities, contradictions and

power dynamics of DIY cultures. Furthermore, DIY cultures already consist of possibilities and spaces for alternative knowledge production including the theorisation of gender, sexuality, class, ability and race in everyday experiences of culture, power and activism. For example, in DIY feminist cultural activism, fanzines have long been established as a crucial resource for the radical theorisation of personal experience and transnational feminist knowledge production (Schilt 2003; Kearney 2006; Zobl 2009). In 'The Engaged Academic', Cresswell and Spandler (2012) discuss the 'lived contradictions' in the academic research of activist movements. In particular, they highlight the problematic assumption that theory is only produced within academia. They argue that the 'dynamic of theory and experience is one which historically occurs within activism anyway' (Cresswell and Spandler 2012, 12-13).

Therefore, greater acknowledgement of, and engagement with, alternative forms and forums of knowledge production is needed to disseminate and develop academic research with/in DIY culture. For example, at the very least researchers can recognise the legitimacy of activist knowledge by engaging with texts written by and for the cultural producers, activists and/or research participants. Research could also be disseminated and discussed in different formats including fan-

zines, blogs, online forums and free events held outside universities or within DIY cultures themselves. For example, one author co-organised and participated in a 'Long Table' discussion of riot grrrl histories with Cazz Blase, Red Chidgey, Teal Triggs and Rachel White at Ladyfest London 2008. The 'Long Table' format was originally developed by performer/professor Lois Weaver and within Ladyfest London context, which included a fanzine and paper tablecloth that could be written and drawn on with crayons, enabled a fluid discussion in which Ladyfest attendees, riot grrrl participants and those interested in riot grrrl histories could join and leave the table for an open and informal discussion.<sup>2</sup>

Finding communities of practice in which we can talk candidly but sensitively about the details of what doing research involves and what it looks like in practice have also been useful. This can be with other researchers working on a variety of projects and with participants in the DIY cultures we are researching. For one author, informal weekly meetings with a small group of postgraduate researchers with a shared interest in gender, queer and feminist research became a crucial space<sup>3</sup>. In this group postgraduate researchers tried out different ways of talking about and understanding research that seemed off-limits or unspeakable in supervisory meetings, formal seminars and tutorials. Sometimes the meetings had a con-



fessional tone with everyone detailing their troubles and failings. The atmosphere of the weekly meetings included a tangible absence of the pressure to appear to 'know it all' and express ideas and experience in academic terms. In communities of practice it becomes possible to negate the fear of making mistakes. In many respects, the 'Researching DIY Cultures' workshop represented an attempt to build a community of practice that we wanted to see consisting of researchers, activists and academics. The recent launch of the network 'Troublemakers: Queer//Feminist Academic-Activists in Cultural Theory & Activism' represents another attempt to fuse academic and activist spaces to create a community of practice that aims to involve academics, researchers, activists, feminists, punks and queers interested in the documentation and critical discussion of radical DIY cultures, practices and histories.<sup>4</sup> The future development of critical academic research of DIY cultures is contingent on the expansion of forums and networks that promote engagement and dialogue between activists, academics and academic-activists outside academic institutions.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Situated Ethical Practice in Research on DIY Cultures**

In conclusion, the position of the participant-researcher can illuminate the limitations of conventional

research ethics. But, more importantly, this position also offers new possibilities for a complex understanding of DIY cultures. From initial awkward encounters with academia to the completion of doctoral research and life as an early-career academic, it is crucial to work through tensions, address moral and ethical dilemmas, and consider personal obligations and questions of responsibility to DIY cultures, activism and academia. In this article, we have discussed the dilemmas that emerged as crucial moments in our respective doctoral research projects on riot grrrl, roller derby and punk. Building upon recent discussions that have highlighted the problem of limited subcultural participation in the development of academic theory and research on DIY cultures (Furness 2012), thinking from the position of the participant-researcher offers an important perspective on the complexities, contradictions and conflicts of DIY lives. In response to the gaps in practical guidance of doing research on DIY cultures of personal belonging, we offer recommendations for a situated ethical practice in three main areas: ethical thinking, data generation and research dissemination. It is our hope that these recommendations and insights will also be considered by academics and researchers who have no prior direct participation with/in DIY cultures in order to inform research design, ethics, methods and dissemination.

Firstly, participant-researchers who are carrying out research with/ in DIY cultures and communities of personal and political belonging can feel they have more distinct obligations and responsibilities to their chosen DIY culture. This has led us to adapt conventional ethical practices to suit the DIY cultures being studied. For instance, this may involve re-consideration of pseudonyms, learning to become an 'ethical friend', finding new ways to negotiate informed consent and developing strategies to cope with affective impacts, unanticipated conflicts and the sudden breakdown of DIY projects and collectives. Secondly, the participant-researcher may also struggle to feel comfortable with using conventional data collection methods, such as field notes and semi-structured interviews, to construct academic knowledge about DIY cultures. More productive data generation methods build upon what DIY cultures already do or would aspire to do. For instance, research projects that facilitate the self-representation of DIY cultures in film, fanzines, art, music, archives, exhibitions and events can generate vast amounts of data focused on how DIY cultures struggle to make sense of their practices. Finally, DIY cultures need to be recognised within a legacy of radical theorisation of everyday experiences of power, inequality and resistance. Therefore, academic knowledge of DIY cultures needs to engage with DIY cul-

tures to disseminate and discuss theory and research. Communities of practice are crucial ways in which participant-researchers alongside researchers, academics, activists, punks, feminists and queers (and many more) can change the ways in which we understand DIY cultures to produce research and theory that is critical, complex and contradictory. Therefore we crave theory and research that is closer to the energetic, chaotic and ramshackle worlds that excited us all in the first place.

### Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> The discussion was recorded, archived and is available to stream and download for free: <http://archive.org/details/riotlady>.
- <sup>3</sup> For more information on the FemJoy group at the University of Edinburgh, see <http://femreadinggroupjoy.wordpress.com>.
- <sup>4</sup> For more information on Troublemakers, see <http://wp.me/p1d4dR-aM>.

### Acknowledgements

We all want to acknowledge our respective institutions and funding bodies for the opportunity to do our research. In particular, Julia Downes would like to thank the troublemakers who struggle to create and understand DIY queer feminist culture and Maddie Breeze would like to thank all the NSOs, referees and skaters that make roller derby pos-

sible and especially those who participated in her doctoral research. Naomi Griffin would like to thank all those involved in the North East DIY punk scene, particularly those who have taken the time to talk to her for her research.

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